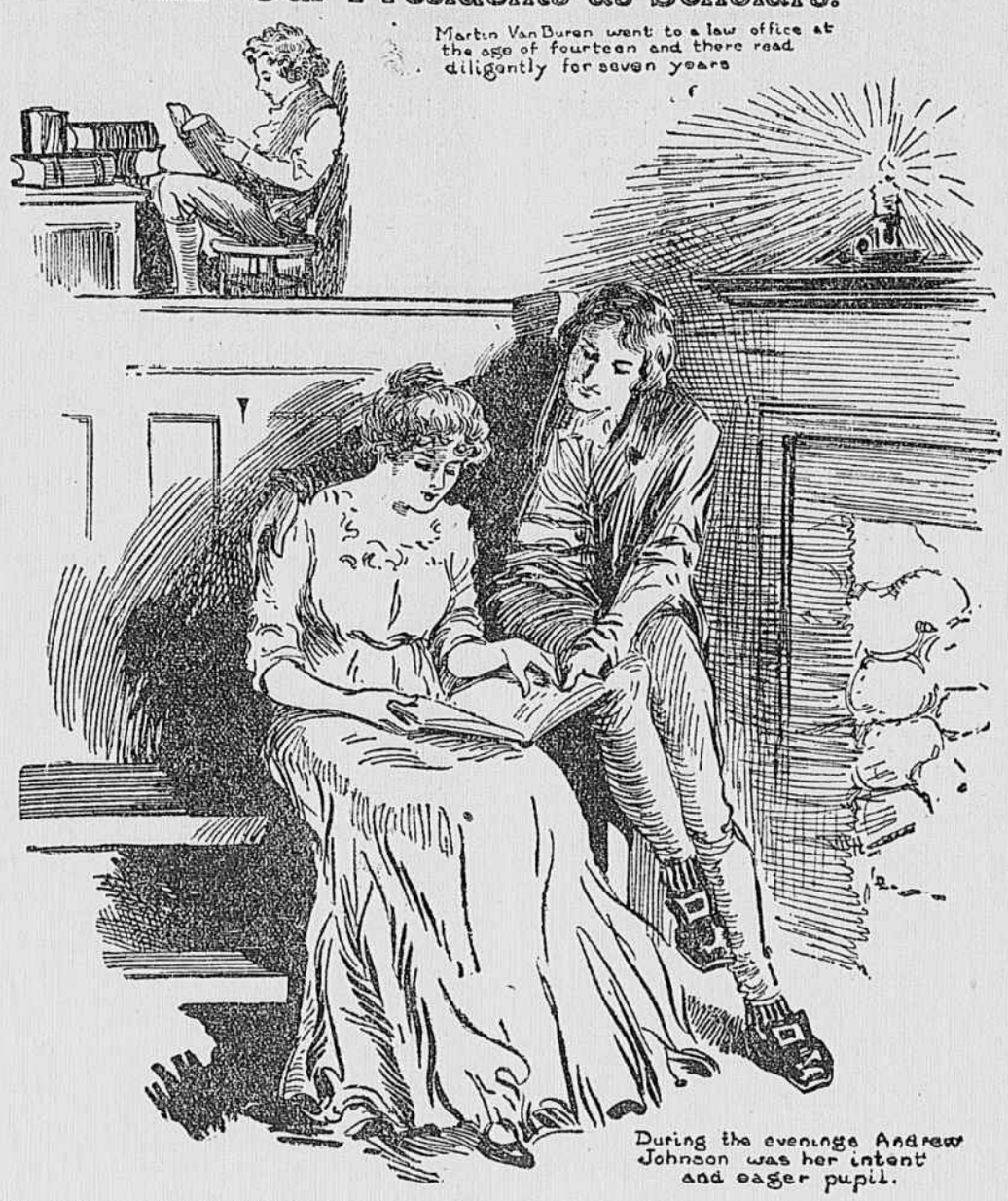
GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH OUR PRESIDENTS

By GEORGE H. PICARD

IX—Our Presidents as Scholars.



SEVENTEEN American Presidents have been college bred. Among those who were not were George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, the two who achieved the loftiest place in history and are held highest in the esteem of the American people. In the case of the former, a college education was not desired; for the latter the only available institution was the University of Hard Knocks.

Although Augustine Washington well could have afforded to send the first born child of his second marriage to college, it was never his intention so to do, and although he died when George was in his eleventh year, no one ever questioned the wisdom of the plan he had settled on for his son's career. In those days it was thought sufficient to have only one scholar in the family. In conformity with that tradition, Mr. Washington had sent his eldest son by a former marriage to Oxford, and had spared no expense in making a scholar out of him. Laurence Washington's career at Oxford had been a brilliant one, and the old Virginia planter was proud of his talented son. It gratified him, also, that instead of settling in England, as he might have done to his great advantage, the clever young Oxonian married the young daughter of the wealthy Fairfaxes and settled down to the comfortable life of a Virginia country gentleman.

Every member of the Washington family idolized this refined and elegant elder brother, and Laurence appears to have been worthy of this admiration. George especially, who was fourteen years his junior, always regarded him as a model worthy of imitation, although he never envied him his scholastic pre-eminence. It was entirely to his own taste that he was never to know Greek and Latin, but was to be taught only what was of the most practical kind. After he had learned to read and write, he was made familiar with the drawing up of all sorts of business documents, and in this work he showed a good deal of facility. His exercise books, written in a large, bold hand, still remain and are models of their kind. Later he devoted considerable attention to surveying, and at the age of sixteen was employed by Lord Fairfax to define the metes and bounds of his great estate in the Shenandoah Valley.

This school of field and forest educated George Washington for his future career as no books, no professors, could have done. It laid the foundation of his perfect health. It steadied his nerves until no roar of wild beast, no warwhoop of savage, could disturb their trained calmness. It fitted him for all the exigencies of the soldier's life. It sustained him during the fearful trials of the post Revolutionary period. Although his spelling was of the sort unknown to lexicographers, it did not detract from his greatness, and would have been regarded as good enough by the sturdy old Virginia planter who planned that his son should be a gentleman without the trouble of being a scholar.

According to those who knew him intimately, Washington obtained practically all of his education not from the study of books, but from the study of men. Of books themselves he knew little, but of what they contained he knew much, a knowledge that came to him from without, from observation and from the ability to measure men and events. His was an education obtained from that most capable of all tutors, experience. Despite his lack of academic facility, who doubts that George Washington was actually one of the "best educated" men who ever lived?

How Lincoln Obtained His Wisdom.

Another famous "scholar" who picked up all his wisdom outside of collegiate halls was Abraham Lincoln. He went to school "by littles"—as he puts it—"and in all it didn't amount to more than a year." It taught him to read and that was all the preparation necessary for a boy who already knew how to think. Child of poverty that he was, his opportunity to acquire knowledge was less than is now within the reach of the children in foreign mission fields. It was only when he became old enough to make himself "the most inveterate borrower of books that any country ever produced" that he began to make headway. When he was in his teens, he once admitted to a friend he had read through every book he had ever heard of in that country for a circuit of fifty miles, a feat that establishes at once both his thirst for knowledge and his ingenuity as a borrower.

Here, in this Indiana wilderness, all his environment as unsympathetic as possible, Abraham Lincoln abandoned himself to his passion for books and their contents. The story reads like fiction, but it isn't. How he made long extracts from everything he read with his turkey buzzard pen and brier root ink; how he wrote on a board when he had no paper and how the wooden fire shovel was his usual slate, on which he ciphered with a charred stick, shaving it off when it had become to grimy for use; how all the logs and boards in his vicinity were covered with his figures and quotations, and how he kept a book in the crack of the logs in his loft, so that he might have it at hand at peep of day—all this sounds like romance, but it is fact.

When he was about eighteen, a ferryman on the Ohio River, Lincoln came in possession of a copy of the Revised Statutes of Indiana, which is now in the Lincoln Memorial collection at Chicago. That work so technical in its phraseology and so uninteresting to the general reader, proved to be more entertaining to the young man than anything he had ever perused, and before he had finished it he made up his mind to become a lawyer and a politician. It was but a dream, but it lost none of its vividness as time passed. It was eight years before he accomplished it, but at the age of twenty-six Abraham Lincoln had made himself master of the intellectual equipment which carried him to the White House and to the solution of some of the greatest problems of his age.

The Tailor Who Was Taught by His Wife.

The man who took up the reins of government when Lincoln was stricken down was the product of an educational development even less systematic than that which evolved the Great Emancipator. At eighteen, when he was married to pretty Eliza McCardle, who was two years his junior, Andrew Johnson could read a little and write not at all. Fortunately for him, the young woman who had taken him for better and for worse without even the blissful ante-nuptial exchange of letters incident to such occasions was as bright as she was comely, and she undertook the education of her boy husband with a zeal that accomplished wonders. She read to him while he worked at his trade of tailor and during the evenings he was her intent and eager pupil.

Under such inspiring tutelage Andrew Johnson soon acquired the rudiments of an education. He was master of much native ability and the possessor of a memory which was truly wonderful in its grasp. From the time of his marriage his intellectual progress was steadily upward. At twenty he was wise enough to become an alderman of Greenville, the North Carolina town in which he lived, and a year later he was elected mayor. About that time, also, he was appointed one of the trustees of Ithca Academy, a remarkable showing for a young man who had learned but recently to write legibly. When at the age of twenty-seven Johnson was sent to the Tennessee House of Representatives, he had acquired the reputation of being one of the best-read lawyers in the State. When his friends were urging his claims for the Vice-Presidential nomination in the national convention of 1864 his early illiteracy came up for discussion. "Gentlemen," declared a member of the delegation, "point me to a man of sounder general education in the State of Tennessee and I will vote for him."

Six other Presidents—Jackson, Van Buren, Taylor, Fillmore, Cleveland and McKinley—never obtained the coveted "sheepskin." One of them, William McKinley, was a freshman at Allegheny College at the age of seventeen, but sickness interrupted his study and by the time he recovered the Civil War was on, and instead of returning to Meadville, he enlisted as a private in the Twenty-third Ohio Regiment, with W. S. Rosecrans as his colonel. When he returned home, his opportunity to obtain a college education had passed; his poverty compelled him to enter a law office and work his way to the bar.

The Most Unscholarly American President.

Zachary Taylor is reputed popularly to be the most unscholarly man who ever went to the White House, but Andrew Jackson was a close second. The former always showed a profound distaste for earning in any form, and the latter had a poor opinion of scholarship as a working asset. Both learned to read and write in boyhood, but any mental training in either instance must have been of the most meagre kind Nature had her own designs in their make-up, and it is clear that she never meant either of them for a scholar. In the case of Jackson, however, his native ability bore him steadily to the front. It made him a wise man in spite of himself.

Van Buren, Fillmore and Cleveland were the New York Presidents who developed into men of decided scholarly calibre, although neither of them was ever matriculated at an institution of higher learning. In the cases of Fillmore and Cleveland, early poverty was the bar against a college career. In the Fillmore household the library consisted of two volumes, the Bible and the hymn book. Cleveland, a minister's son, had the advantage of scholarly early training, but as a lad of seventeen he went out to fight the battle of life alone. He never ceased to regret that he had not been a college man. He admitted that the academic environment had a peculiar fascination for him. It was for that reason that he settled down at Princeton at the close of his political career. The Van Burens were well to do, but neither Martin nor his sturdy Dutch father saw much merit in the college system, and the boy went directly from the public school to a law office at the age of fourteen, and there read diligently for seven years.

Among the seventeen Presidents who form the college group at least three are conspicuous for their scholarship—Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and John Quincy Adams. Were this list of distinctively scholarly Chief Executives to be extended, the elder Adams, James Buchanan and James A. Garfield might be included.

The Most Brilliant Presidential Scholar.

It is admitted universally that Thomas Jefferson was the most brilliant scholar who ever reached the presidential chair. As the eldest son of a rich Virginia planter, it was decided that he was to go to college, and it was his father's dying injunction that "Thomas be made a scholar." To that end he went as a small boy to the school kept by the rector of the parish, Rev. James Maury, who loaded him with enough Greek and Latin, Jefferson declared, to enter Oxford or Cambridge instead of the little provincial College of William and Mary.

To the Williamsbury college he went, however, at the age of seventeen, with what he admits to have been "an insatiable thrist for knowledge." For four years he averaged fifteen hours a day at his self-imposed task of absorbing all that the faculty of William and Mary could teach him, and his outside reading in the classics covered as much ground as is prescribed nowadays for the university degree of doctor of philosophy. Then, when he had finished at Williamsburg, he returned to Shadwell with the determination to be a student all the remainder of his life.

Apparently Jefferson never wavered in this resolution. Throughout all his public service, whether at home or abroad, he adhered to his early intention of devoting a considerable portion of his time to study after a more or less systematic plan. During his residence in Europe he made the acquaintance of many notable scholars of the time, and was regarded by them as an equal. As a literary man, the author of the Declaration of Independence had no peer among the builders of the republic; he stood alone in his ability to clothe his ideas in the most fitting expression. His love for books was greater than his regard for the emoluments of office, and it was the sorrow of his old age that he was compelled by adverse circumstances to sell the library he had accumulated at Monticello, the finest and best-selected collection of books and manuscripts owned by an American citizen.

Nine years after Jefferson left William and Mary, James Madison was graduated from Princeton. He was twenty years of age, small framed, thoughtful-faced and had the "clear, forecasting vision of a statesman." Even at that early age he was a silent worshiper at the shrine of Jefferson, and was even more of a bookworm than was that great Virginian. After graduation, he remained a few months to study privately with Dr. Witherspoon, the President, and when he left Princeton he carried to his Virginia home the groundwork of that wise and thorough scholarship which was to prove of such immense service to him in the great role he was to play in the founding of the nation.

For some time this fragile, serious-faced student was interested in theology, and he had about made up his mind to devote himself to the church when the signs of the times began to point so unmistakably to the War of the Revolution that his luminous young mind and patriotic heart were roused to action. More than all, perhaps, his admiration and friendship for Jefferson prompted him to close his books and to take the position in public affairs to which his wealth and station entitled him. But James Madison was ever a student. For him the big, new White House, with all its pretentious nakedness and lack of association, was but an uneven exchange for his well-stocked and comfortable library at Montpelier.

Two Honor Men at Harvard.

Both the Adamses were Harvard men, and both won honors. The elder was given the opportunity to secure a classical education through the personal sacrifices of his parents, who were determined to make a Congregational minister of their son despite his protest that he had no taste for the life. His refusal to take up the work was a bitter risappointment to his pious father and mother, but it was some consolation to know that he was "of good habits and a clever student." He was always a man of scholarly habit and kept up his philosophical and theological studies to the last. In his old age he was as keen for a theological disputation as was ever that polemical Scotchman, James I.

The younger Adams's preparation for his Harvard career was unusually comprehensive. His long residence in European cities as the companion of his father while the latter was on his various foreign missions had made him master of several languages, and he had also been a pupil at a number of famous European secondary schools. He had even had a taste of diplomacy and had relished it exceedingly. No other American boy of seventeen had been given such an opportunity to lay the foundation of a brilliant education as had this Braintree lad, the son of the man who was fighting the financial and diplomatic battles of his country in a land "covertly hostile, but always smiling."

All at once young Adams awoke to the fact that he with without that roll of parchment which even in those days meant so much to the New Englander. His father was just about to go to England as minister to the court of St. James. It is doubtful whether Harvard ever held within its walls a student who turned his back on so much as did John Quincy Adams when he made up his mind to enter them. He returned to America, entered the junior class at Harvard and was graduated with highest honors in 1787. He was a student to the end of his life.

Ninety-three years after John Quincy Adams left college another man, who became President, was graduated from Harvard. His name was Theodore Roosevelt and his record as a student was above the average. He was far less devoted to the cultivation of the classics than were the Adamses, but it should be remembered that Greek and Latin are no longer rated as the most available mental discipline. So, although Harvard's third and latest alumnus may know vastly less about classical forms and romance philology than did that clever father and his still more brilliant son of more than a century ago, it is highly probably that Colonel Roosevelt could give them numerous points on subjects which would seem very new to them.

A Phenomenal Student at William and Mary.

Besides Jefferson, William and Mary College graduated two other men who reached the presidency—James Monroe and John Tyler. The latter was a phenomenal student, entering at the age of twelve and receiving his degree at seventeen. His father was a brilliant lawyer and his precocious son began to practice at nineteen, with remarkable success from the first. Monroe entered William and Mary at sixteen, studied two years, and at the Declaration of Independence threw down his books, left Williamsburg, hastened to Washington's headquarters at New York and enrolled himself as a cadet in the army. He served in the ranks during most of the war, but toward the close was aide on the staff of Lord Sterling, with the rank of major. His college gave him his degree at the close of hostilities.

William Henry Harrison and his grandson, Benjamin, ninth and twenty-third Presidents of the United States, respectively, were given abundant opportunity to obtain a college education and they were excellent students, the former taking his degree at Hampden-Sydney, the latter at Miami University, with the "fourth honors of his class." James K. Polk was fond of study and set his heart on going to college, but he was so fragile that he could not gratify his inclination until he had attained his majority. Then he went to the University of North Carolina and in two years was graduated at the head of his class.

Franklin Pierce entered Bowdoin College at sixteen and was a good scholar although never a brilliant one. His social proclivities were always in the ascendant, and he was a leader in most of the student activities then in vogue at the Maine College. At the time he was preparing for the New Hampshire bar John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson were the foremost figures in American public life, and Pierce resolved to go into politics at his earliest opportunity. When he entered the Senate he was only thirty-three, its youngest member, thus proving that his education had served him well. Pierce's successor, James Buchanan, began the study of the classics in his eighth year and at fourteen was ready to enter Dickinson College. There he made a record which has never been excelled, proving himself to be the best Greek and Latin scholar ever known in Carlisle. Throughout his entire career Buchanan kept up his studious habits, and at the time of his appointment as minister to Great Britain was regarded as one of the best scholars in the Romance languages ever sent on a foreign mission.

The Only Graduate of the Military Academy.

General Grant was the only graduate of the United States Military Academy who ever became President. He was not a brilliant student at West Point, but he was conscientious and thorough and attentive to discipline. Rutherford B. Hayes was unusually studious as a boy, and when he was graduated at Kenyon College, in 1842, was valedictorian of his class. Later, at the Harvard Law School, he was regarded as a student of exceptional intellectual power. Chester A. Arthur, son of a poor Baptist minister from Ireland, entered Union College at fourteen, and his social disposition and his tender years interfered considerably with his standing in his classes, but he managed to graduate with an average record.

Perhaps the best-equipped scholar among the later Presidents was James A. Garfield, who, despite the fact that he was obliged to spend much of his time during his college life in securing the bare means of subsistence, became an honor man at Williams and shortly after his graduation President of Hiram College. Garfield was a student in every sense of the word and remained so until the day of his death, never permitting the stress of political life to rob him of his taste for letters.

President Taft is Yale's sole representative in the college presidential group.